

Soldiers Use AKO to Voice Views

Patrick A. Swan

A favorite pastime for many soldiers is voicing their opinions on how to improve their uniforms and equipment (see related sidebar). Unfortunately, they rarely give those views to the people who can act on them. That oversight changed in a big way Aug. 8, 2003, when the Project Manager for Soldier Equipment placed the following short teaser in the Group Announcement section of the main AKO home page:

WANTED:

Feedback on soldier equipment. Please visit the PM Soldier Equipment (PM SEQ) community page to provide your feedback on everything from uniforms to body armor to combat optics.

The field response surprised even the most optimistic-minded at PM SEQ. "Before we got the Army-wide announcement posted on AKO's home page, we had 33 unique visitors to our community page for all of July," said Community Page Administrator Frans Van der Lee. "AKO listed our announcement on a Friday night. By Saturday, we'd had 535 unique visitors. On Sunday, we had 438 more. The overwhelming response we received in just one weekend is proof positive of AKO's power," Van der Lee remarked.

PM COL Greg Fritz said hundreds of soldiers, including some in Baghdad, posted feedback to the Soldier Equipment discussion threads on AKO. Van der Lee said 22 soldiers

e-mailed him directly through the e-mail link on the PM SEQ community page.

"Surprisingly, the majority of the e-mails were purely positive feedback, which means a lot to the product teams working hard to develop the best equipment possible," Fritz said. "Also there were a few commercial-off-the-shelf solutions suggested and other outside-of-the-box ideas."

Fritz said the purpose for placing the announcement was simple. "We wanted to drive traffic to our community page and make soldiers aware of where their equipment comes from and that our product teams care about them and want their feedback. We also wanted to give soldiers a direct link to the PMs making the decisions and the product teams developing the equipment. Now they can have a direct line of communication to those responsible for delivering the goods. More importantly, Fritz added, the announcement was placed because soldiers are the customers.

What Does Soldier Feedback Look Like?

The following is a sampling of soldier feedback from the AKO Web site.

SPC Daniel G. Kemp
B Co., 3/502 Infantry

Subject: Soldier Feedback Wanted on Interceptor Body Armor (IBA)

This is my second deployment wearing IBA with plates, and I can say it works a lot better with the MOLLE [Modular Lightweight Load-carrying Equipment] than it did with the old LBV's [Load-Bearing Vests] and ALICE [All-purpose Lightweight Individual Carrying Equipment] rucksacks. Most of us have just attached the MOLLE pouches to the fronts of our IBA's and thrown the MOLLE carrier vest into our B bags for later. It's a good system. A guy from our 3rd Brigade stopped three 7.62 x 39s with his chest plate, and still shot the guy who shot him.

Now, is the IBA the way to go if you do not have plates? No. It's designed for front-line close combat. It's not a one-size-fits-all measure. The Army is so injury-paranoid they want everyone to have some kind of body armor just to cover themselves, but fail to acknowledge the need for various types of body armor

“They are the ones putting their lives on the line serving their country,” Fritz continued. “They deserve the best equipment and near real-time answers to their questions and concerns. Knowledge is power and the more information we can pass to them about the equipment, the better they will perform. The more feedback we get from them, the better we can serve them and get the best possible equipment in their hands quickly.”

LTC Rod Wade, an AKO Team Leader, said soliciting and obtaining such field feedback is what Army knowledge management is all about. “The work by PM SEQ to quickly gather feedback from an informal community of interest as large as the Army represents the ideal of combining new technology, people with common interests in making things better and a receptive functional proponent to make the Army better,” Wade said.

The AKO discussion threads began with solicitations for feedback on uniforms, interceptor body armor (IBA), thermal weapons sights, night vision devices (NVDs), boots and the Rapid Fielding Initiative (RFI).

Van der Lee said that those items were chosen because they are some of the more recent hot items and because soldiers always had comments on uniforms. He added that soldiers took it upon themselves to start their own follow-on discussion threads on the community page for other pieces of equipment. PM, SEQ personnel were very happy to see that because it allows them to just plant the seed and let it grow. Some of those soldier-generated threads included discussions about

the Army physical fitness uniform, the battle-dress uniform (BDU), fire-support equipment, the M45 protective mask, the Class A uniform and the Army beret.

Fritz said it was no surprise that soldiers were brutally honest in responding to questions about the subject topics, but he was surprised at the initiative to start their own discussion threads as well as to see the feedback generated on topics that weren’t even proposed. “There are a lot of soldiers out there eager to have their say,” Fritz continued, “and I was surprised by the number of replies from outside of our organization that provided great answers to some tough questions. There are many subject matter experts on soldier equipment throughout the Army, and these threaded discussions give them an opportunity to weigh in no matter what their current duties are.”

Fritz stated that soldier-driven feedback is essential for building a better Army, but AKO also plays a critical role because it provides a forum for Internet-savvy younger soldiers as well as everyone in the Army family — from senior Army leaders and retirees to family members, commanders and noncommissioned officers. AKO thrives around-the-clock and around-the-globe harnessing the “intellectual capital” or good ideas from one of the world’s most successful institutions. PM SEQ is proud to do its part in promoting AKO and the free exchange of ideas for improving America’s Army.

Fritz said that PM SEQ will share the feedback with product development teams and others who can influence decisions about soldier equipment including HQDA, the

just like different types of gloves or whatever. But it’s all about the funding, guys. Look at all the money that got flushed down the Crusader howitzer boondoggle and think of all the operator-level gear we could have bought with it.

SGT Michael Martin

Subject: Soldier Feedback Wanted on NVDs

I am with 3/3 Infantry Division and we went all the way to Baghdad wearing PVS-7A. No, they were not comfortable, but they helped us get where we needed to be during night and dawn. I have driven all night and I am home so, yes it would have been nice to have at least 7B, but oh well. Yes, we are a high-deployment unit so our low-tech 7A was much better overall than the opposition’s, and that allowed us to do what we did. I hope the Army does upgrade these old NVDs [night vision devices], but I guess we showed they work.

SGT Benjamin Lewis

C Co. 1-506 Infantry (Air Assault)

The issue of boots seems to be debated more by noninfantry, nonhumping types. As any good infantryman will tell you, the current boots work just fine. You need to take care of your feet. Fresh socks, foot powder and exercise will keep your feet dry and hard. Still, new boots would be an enjoyed luxury. As far as steel-toed boots in the motor pool, they used to be

U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, the Army Test and Evaluation Command, the Army Acquisition Executive, the Army Forces Command and industry. In addition, the information will be shared with anyone who cares to listen. "None of this valuable feedback is locked away in PM SEQ's vaults," Fritz said. "On the contrary, AKO enables us to put it out there for everyone. As a matter of fact, anyone logging onto AKO can access it right from the home page, just by clicking on AKO Discussions in the upper left-hand corner," he added.

PM SEQ previously captured feedback for programs such as RFI primarily through onsite visits, phone calls and e-mails. RFI is a new program and, at first, the office was just dealing with one brigade. That soon grew to one division, and then another. "Now, it is spreading like wildfire across the Army, for units being deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq," Fritz stated. "Thus, by using threaded discussions and knowledge centers on AKO, we can pass lessons-learned feedback from each brigade to their successors and reach a far wider audience than phone calls, e-mails and onsite visits."

Fritz and Van der Lee take issue with critics who say such feedback is merely anecdotal and not scientific. Van der Lee stated, "What could be more scientific than a soldier putting on his uniform and body armor and then noting that he cannot access the pockets on his chest? You can only test and experiment with equipment in a controlled environment so much. It is the soldier in the field employing the equipment that will provide to the most true and scientific test of the equipment."

Fritz cited another example using thermal weapons sights. "During the infamous Iraqi sandstorms, our Army had very limited visibility," he said. "But soldiers in Iraq (not a scientific-controlled test environment) discovered that they still had good visibility with their individual and crew-served thermal weapons sights, even when the sandstorms obscured nearly every other optical sensor."

"Although scientific feedback is important, so is feedback from soldiers on the ground in all the places where AKO reaches," Fritz said. "We have already received feedback from hundreds of soldiers, around-the-clock and around-the-globe and, scientific or not, we want to capture their feedback so we can do a better job of supporting them," he added.

Some soldiers may say that although discussion threads let them vent, nothing will change. Fritz disputes that assertion as well. "In less than 1 week, we have generated feedback and replies from hundreds of soldiers across the Army. In turn, we share this feedback with everyone who influences the design, development, testing, fielding and funding of soldier equipment. I assure you, a soldier's honest feedback significantly influences the decisions that are made in that entire process," Fritz continued. "All those ideas that were stuck in a soldier's head as he or she served honorably on the front lines are finding their way back to the people who can make profound changes to benefit the entire Army. One soldier's lesson learned now has the potential to benefit the rest of the Army as soon as that soldier can get to an

authorized. It wasn't until people started dropping things on their toes that they realized the steel is thin and it will collapse. I would rather have a few broken toes than missing some that have been cut off by my own boot. That is the reason for no steel toes in the motor pools.

SGT Clifford Oliver

I agree that the LBV has to go. I just spent 6 months in Iraq and the way to travel is with the IBA and your magazines, canteens (if you use them) and whatever else you use strapped to the body armor. I think we should do away with the LBV altogether. The IBA should be standard issue to all soldiers instead of the old body armor we have.

Anonymous

A couple of thoughts on what I'm reading in this discussion:

1. Pockets are an issue. Body armor takes away the 4 pockets on the BDU blouse. A protective mask takes away at least the left hip pocket and restricts access to the left cargo pocket. This leaves soldiers with their right hip and cargo pockets. I'm leaving the back pockets out of this comment; I haven't used them in about 10 years. A possible solution includes slanting the chest pockets on the BDU blouse. This will ease access to these pockets while wearing body armor. Add calf pockets similar to aviator BDUs. Having worn aviator

Internet connection and put it out there for everyone else to read.”

Fritz stated that things have already changed because AKO is transforming the Army in ways that most of us never imagined. As the Army transforms to a knowledge-based force, everyone will have the potential to be better informed and to make smarter decisions. “The change genie is already out of the bottle,” he continued, “and bright, young soldiers who are tech-savvy will continue to use AKO to have their voice heard and to help build a better future Army.”

Fritz hopes that soldiers will bookmark the PM SEQ site and community page and will continue to return, to contribute their feedback and to keep abreast of what is being done with that feedback. The vision is for AKO Knowledge Collaboration Centers that will be a single-source repository of detailed information, technical manuals, training modules, briefings and notices. The goal is to give soldiers the best equipment and universal access to information about that equipment. The AKO community page is their direct link to equipment decision makers.

Fritz added that it is important for soldiers to spread the word about the PM SEQ community page on AKO and what it provides to them. “The more feedback we get, the more justification we have to implement change and improve soldier equipment,” Fritz concluded.

PM SEQ is a component of Program Executive Office (PEO) Soldier, which was activated June 7, 2002, to provide centralized soldier system acquisition management.

PEO Soldier is the first organization with acquisition responsibility to develop, field and sustain everything a soldier wears or carries. PEO Soldier’s mission is to arm and equip soldiers to dominate the full spectrum of peace and war, now and in the future. Developing and fielding an effective soldier system requires alignment, synchronization and funding of multiple programs. PEO Soldier manages 346 programs organized under the direction of three project managers. Project Manager Soldier Warrior consists of Product Manager Land Warrior and Product Manager Air Warrior. Project Manager Soldier Weapons includes Product Manager Individual Weapons and Product Manager Crew-Served Weapons. Project Manager Soldier Equipment consists of Product Manager Soldier Sensors and Product Manager Clothing and Individual Equipment.

Additional information about PEO Soldier can be found on AKO at www.us.army.mil, or the PEO Soldier public Web site at <http://peosoldier.army.mil> and at <http://www.pmsoldierequipment.army.mil>.

PATRICK A. SWAN is the Chief Information Office/G-6 Public Affairs Officer. He has an M.S. in communication and public administration from the University of Oklahoma.

BDUs, I got a lot of use out of these pockets, especially while seated in a vehicle or aircraft. As far as the cargo pockets, add an opening to them similar to the aviator BDUs so that when the soldier is seated this opening is facing up.

2. Soft cap vs. the beret. I think great arguments can be made for both sides. I go with function. I can put my soft cap on with one hand and it keeps the sun out of my eyes. I often think that the Army forgot to acquire tables for every building exit on post. Without these tables, I have to put everything on the floor to get my beret on.
3. Field uniforms and clothing allowance. Four sets of BDUs aren’t enough. I typically keep at least six uniforms on hand. At almost \$50 per set, the price for BDUs is a little steep. Add in the physical training uniform, and a soldier’s clothing allowance doesn’t cover all the costs. I’m strongly in favor of a direct-exchange system for BDUs with a reduced clothing allowance. After all, how many soldiers do you know who look at their clothing allowance as an opportunity to pay bills or, like I used to do, blow it on beer?